

United States Life Saving Station
At Surfside
Nantucket
Nantucket County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-930

HABS
MASS
10-NANT
49-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

UNITED STATES LIFE SAVING STATION

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MASS
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49-

Location: At Surfside (a cluster of summer cottages on the south shore), Nantucket Island, Massachusetts.

Present Owner: American Youth Hostels, Inc.

Present Occupant: Same

Present Use: Hostel

Brief Statement

of Significance: A carpenter gothic building, it was the first life saving station operated by the United States Government on Nantucket.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners:

1874 -- Built by U. S. Government as a Life Saving Station.

1962 -- Lilye D. Mason bought property.

1963 to date -- American Youth Hostels, Inc.

2. Date of erection: 1874,
(Abstract, U. S. Life Saving Service Report 1910)

3. Architect: Not known.

4. Original plans, construction, etc.: Life saving stations were built to house every approved appliance for rescuing the ship-wrecked from stranded vessels. The cost was estimated to be between \$10,000 and \$15,000 each.

This building has elaborate exposed trusses at either end.

5. Notes on alterations and additions: Building has been remodelled for use as a dwelling, but much of the original construction remains.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: Surfside is the name given to about four miles of coast on the south shore of Nantucket Island, about three and a half miles from the Town of Nantucket.

The U. S. Life Saving Service was founded in 1871 and although there were eventually four stations, the Surfside Station was

the first one operated on Nantucket. They were located at points where wrecks were unusually frequent. It was estimated that over five hundred shipwrecks occurred around the coast of the Island from the time of its first settlement by the white men to 1877.

A vacation guide published in 1889 mentions the following, "The Life Saving Station at Surfside is about twenty rods west of the Nantucket railroad depot. Here, for eight months of the year men nightly patrol the beach for three miles each way."

In 1877, the bark, W. F. Marshall, came ashore on the south side of the Island and through the efforts of the crew of the Surfside Station who made a line fast to the vessel with sling attached, the crew, fourteen in number, as well as the wife and child of the steward, were safely landed and cared for.

One of the saddest wrecks off Surfside was the loss of the three masted schooner, T. B. Witherspoon, in 1886, when seven lives were lost and only two saved.

As late as 1902 another of many rescue feats occurred when the lumber-laden schooner, Flyaway, went onto Handkerchief Shoal about thirty miles from Surfside and Captain Clisby and his crew from the Surfside Station, after five hours of work with their surf-boat, succeeded in saving five of the crew who were so exhausted they could have held out but a few hours longer.

The Life Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service were merged in 1915 to form the U.S. Coast Guard, and the Life Saving Stations were eventually abandoned.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photographs of Surfside Station showing large doors to accommodate surf-boats; and photos of sequence of Practice Drill, taken in 1900 by M. L. Crosby and reproduced in Historic Nantucket, January, 1965; photographs in station and men drilling in 106 Views of Nantucket by John Henry Robinson, 1911; wreck of T. B. Witherspoon from original sketch by John J. Cardner in Wrecks Around Nantucket by Arthur H. Gardner, 1877; two photographs of the wreck of Warren Sawyer at Surfside in Fifty Climpes of Nantucket by Murphy, 1897; drawing of life-boat on way to wreck by Alexander Seavern in By the Sea by Louise S. Baker, 1893.
2. Bibliography:
Baker, Louise S. By the Sea. Nantucket: R. B. Hussey, Printer, 1893.

Douglas-Lithgow, Robert Alexander. Nantucket, a History.
New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914 (includes
description of work carried on by the life-saving crew).

Gardner, Arthur H. Wrecks Around Nantucket. Nantucket: A. H.
Gardner (pub.), 1877.

Prepared by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin
Nantucket, Massachusetts
August, 1966

PART II. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared for the Historic American Buildings Survey project on Nantucket, Massachusetts. They are part of a continuing HABS comprehensive survey of the early architecture and urban design of Nantucket financed by a grant from the Nantucket Historical Trust.

The project was under the general supervision of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Historical information was provided by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin of Nantucket, Massachusetts. Photographs are by Cortlandt V. D. Hubbard of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The material was edited for deposit in the Library of Congress by Mrs. Constance Werner Ramirez, July 1971.